

## Overture to *Candide*—Leonard Bernstein

Almost twenty years after Leonard Bernstein's death, the critics are still arguing over the meaning and impact of his legacy. What is clear, however, is that the world rarely enjoys the genius of someone who excels supremely in so many artistic endeavors. Pianist, conductor, television personality, teacher, mentor, social gadfly, and composer of both popular musical theatre and "serious works," Bernstein wore all hats with avidity. And he enjoyed stunning success in most. He had a passion about everything that he essayed, whether conducting the Mahler that he loved so well, or helping audiences "peel" apart the mysteries of music in his many teaching rôles. He knew so much, and could do so much, that he genuinely thought that he could do it all. His leadership of the New York Philharmonic Orchestra and other orchestras is legendary, but everyone knows there were some concerts that, frankly, got away from him in his self-indulgence. He worked assiduously as a composer of "serious" music, but those works—from youthful successes to his late efforts—have enjoyed mixed success. But all that simply says is only that he was human. Other than his epochal conducting, there is one field in which he garnered almost universal acclaim, and that is musical theatre. When all is said and done, he possessed a talent and a facility for the stage that was as deep as it was prolific. He simply understood the genre and its demands.

He plunged in early, writing for student productions at Harvard, and working with a cabaret group (that included Judy Holiday) while a student at the Curtis Institute. At the age of twenty-six, his ballet *Fancy Free* was first performed at the Metropolitan Opera and *On the Town* opened on Broadway. *Wonderful Town*, *Peter Pan*, *Facsimile*, and *Candide* soon followed, as it seemed that everything he touched became gold.

Based upon Voltaire's well-known novella, *Candide*, the original Broadway musical, opened on the first of December in 1957. It was not a smashing success early on, but over the years—and through many versions, and a changing cast of writers and contributors—it has achieved an enduring place in the musical theatre repertoire. Its innate wit, sparkle, and general "cheekiness" was natural fodder for Bernstein's own musical personality, and his songs for the production have come to personify the whole rollicking enterprise.

The overture is crafted from a buoyant mélange of some of the most memorable tunes from the show, and has become one of the most-performed works by an American composer on symphony concerts. The "catchy" tunes are cleverly cast into asymmetrical rhythmic patterns (a typical Bernstein trait) that keep the bouncy drive going as this brief work careens to the end. After all these years, it may seem that all of the tunes are vaguely familiar, so enduring is the work. And, indeed, some may recognize the melody of the over-the-top song for coloratura soprano (think of the young Barbara Cook or Madeline Kahn), "Glitter and Be Gay," from its use as a theme for the Dick Cavett television show. The overture to *Candide* has taken its place along with much of *West Side Story* as representative of one of America's most multi-talented and influential musicians, and is a perfect curtain opener that is thoroughly American.

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